

March 24, 2006: Rahall Requests Additional Funding For Slashed Conservation Programs

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - While oil and gas conglomerates have been racking up record profits and shortchanging the Treasury by not paying their royalty obligations, the Administration is proposing to step back 30 years in funding levels for a popular program that provides citizens recreational opportunities, charged U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV).

Rahall, in a recent letter to Chairman Charles Taylor (R-NC) and Ranking Member Norm Dicks (D-WA) of the Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations requested that funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) be increased by \$100 million for the Stateside portion of the program, and by \$220 million for Federal land acquisition purposes.

"The Fund is a balanced and effective means of dedicating a small fraction of the enormous revenues generated by depletion of outer continental shelf resources to the conservation of resources on shore," stated Rahall.

Concerning the Administration's funding proposal, Rahall wrote, "This level of funding severely undermines the 40-year-old promise of LWCF, and, instead, allows the Fund to be used to offset spending for other purposes. If enacted, the proposed LWCF funding would be the lowest in more than 30 years, and woefully inadequate for protecting vital resources."

The Stateside program serves as an indispensable component of State parks and recreation budgets nationwide. But the Administration effectively zeroes out that half of the LWCF program, depriving State and local governments of funding needed to provide recreational facilities for their citizens. Such funds are typically used, for example, for local parks, and provide safe play areas for youth sports teams, investments in the well-being of America's youth.

Rahall added, "The result of these thinning budgets is that many important programs are scrambling for crumbs. The extent of harm is becoming evident by absurd suggestions that Americans sell their heritage - their children's public lands inheritance - to offset worthy Department programs."

Adding insult to injury, disturbing accounts of uncollected royalty revenues - monies that these wealthy oil and gas companies owe the government - are making headlines.

"These unpaid royalties negatively affect the ability of government to operate effectively and cost the American taxpayer important services. Further, this situation undermines the public's trust that their government is receiving what it is due from use of the Nation's public resources," declared Rahall.

Rahall has joined other House Democrats in calling for Congressional hearings to review the Department of the Interior's royalty collection program.

The Administration also proposes a \$92.9 million cut in construction and maintenance for the National Parks, as well as a \$10 million cut in repair and rehabilitation.

"A significant investment in maintenance is desperately needed to avoid permanent damage to some of the most popular and historic structures and facilities in the National Park System," said Rahall.

Further, the budget request proposes to extend authority to collect the coal industry-paid fees which finance the Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) program through the end of Fiscal Year 2007. Currently, that authority expires at the end of June 2006.

"As an author, along with Representative Cubin, of legislation to extend the life of that program, I am pleased that the Administration has acknowledged the need to continue this program. I have long advocated an extension as essential to providing certainty to industry and to the States striving to address dangerous abandoned mine sites. But also important is the way those funds are annually allocated," wrote Rahall.

For years, the allocation of AML funds has failed to keep pace with expansive restoration needs. Moreover, it has failed even to keep up with the level of AML receipts. The Office of Surface Mining has identified \$3 billion just in top-tier priority coal mining site problems, with billions more needed for work at sites that pose risks to humans and the environment. The result of continued underfunding is a progressive deterioration of the mine sites, growth in the dangers posed to nearby communities, and, ultimately, increased costs to repair and reclaim those properties.

Rahall declared, "I urge allocation of these funds at a higher level, more in keeping with the real needs of mining communities."

While Americans demonstrate widespread support for endangered species recovery, the budget request does not commit sufficient resources. For example, the endangered species listing program warrants \$30 million. An increase from the approximately \$18 million proposed would enable the Fish and Wildlife Service to make a dent in the backlog of the 282 species that are candidates for listing, and the 524 listed species without critical habitat designations.

"Dwindling funds have impeded our ability to conserve valuable resources, maintain our National Parks and National Forests, and enable the recovery of a wealth of animals threatened by extinction," concluded Rahall.